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[Friendly Fire - Raising questions about 9/11 gets an Army sergeant demoted for 'disloyalty'](#) By

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These days, Donald Buswell's job is not as exciting or dangerous as it once was. For the past few months, his working hours have been spent taking care of some 40-plus wounded soldiers at San Antonio's Fort Sam Houston medical center. The work is sometimes menial, even janitorial, but he doesn't mind. After all, Buswell has been where these men are — three years ago, he too was recovering from wounds received in a battle zone in Iraq.



"I truly consider this an honor," Buswell told his dad not long ago. Still, it's not exactly where Buswell expected to be after 20 years of well-respected service in the Army.

Since joining the Army in 1987, he had risen to the rank of sergeant first class, serving in both Gulf Wars, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Korea. He ended up with shrapnel scars and a Purple Heart and, back in the U.S. after his last tour in Iraq, a job as intelligence analyst at Fort Sam Houston.

He couldn't have foreseen that one e-mail could derail his career and put him on his way out of the Army. One e-mail, speculating about events that millions of people have questioned for the last six years, was all it took...

Sgt. Buswell wants to know: What really happened on 9/11? And he said so in his e-mail. In the few paragraphs of that August 2006 message — a reply not to someone outside the service, but to other soldiers — Buswell wrote that he thought the official report of what happened that day at the Pentagon, and in the Pennsylvania crash of United Airlines Flight 93, was full of errors and unanswered questions.

"Who really benefited from what happened that day?" he asked rhetorically. Not "Arabs," but "the Military Industrial Complex," Buswell concluded. "We must demand a new, independent investigation."

For voicing those opinions in an e-mail to 38 people on the San Antonio Army base, Buswell was stripped of his security clearance, fired from his job, demoted, and ordered to undergo a mental health exam.

(He was also ordered not to speak with the press. Information for this story came from documents, conversations with Buswell's family members and friends, and sources within Fifth Army who asked not to be named.)

As if all that weren't enough, Fort Sam Houston's chief of staff penned a letter accusing Buswell of "making statements disloyal to the United States."

His father, Winthrop Buswell, said that his son "is one of the most patriotic people I know."

"Donald saw something that his conscience led him to dispute," he said. "That's just the type of man he is."

For his dissent, Donald has paid a heavy price.

Baghdad's early light danced across the surface of a man-made lake. For Buswell, that April 2004 morning was the perfect time for a run. Behind him, the soldiers of Baghdad's Camp Victory were, for the most part, not yet stirring. The path he took was a historic one: In the palace just a couple of hundred yards away, surrounded by the lake, Saddam Hussein was in custody, locked away in a former torture cell.

Five miles into the jog, Buswell paused to catch his breath, and something splashed in the water nearby with unusual force. He jumped back, surprised, and surveyed the area with care. Seeing no threat, he resumed his run, heading toward a couple of Iraqi men painting a small building.

Seconds later, Buswell heard a growing whistle and turned just in time to see a 122mm rocket barreling toward him. He dove out of the way, and the round hit several dozen yards behind him. Picking himself up off the ground, he saw another white trail forming over the water. He started running again, but had made it only a few steps when the force of another impact blew him to the ground. Shrapnel, rocks, and dirt rained down on him. Ahead, a fourth round hit the Iraqi painters, blowing off body parts and engulfing them in flames.

Horrified, Buswell ran toward the men and tried to extinguish the flames. The men were still alive, screaming in agony. Then, he heard the increasingly familiar whistle of another rocket and once again hit the dirt. The one that struck the nearby road was a dud, like the first that hit the water. Had it exploded, Buswell probably would have died. When he turned to look again at the two Iraqi men, he saw they were dead, their bodies charred and smoking.

"It was like the opening scene of Saving Private Ryan," his dad recalled him saying.

By this time, troops from the camp were running toward the scene. Only when the first of those soldiers arrived and screamed for a medic did Buswell realize he'd been hit. Sharp flakes of metal were embedded up and down his left leg and all over the right side of his back.

The relatively minor wounds Buswell suffered that day were his first in a battle zone, despite the fact that he'd served in southern Iraq during Desert Storm a decade before. In his first few years in the Army, Buswell had been a metalworker and had dealt with explosives. Since 1990, he had been an intelligence analyst.

Buswell's wounds were cleaned and bandaged within an hour of the rocket attack, and he rejoined his unit almost immediately. But 2004 had more — and more pleasant — developments in store for him.

Two months after the attack, he returned to the United States, to Fort Hood in Central Texas, and married his girlfriend Lori, officially becoming step-dad to her 11-year-old daughter Kaitlyn, who calls him "DD" (Daddy Donald) for short. In one of those strange quirks of war, Buswell had actually met Lori's ex-husband and Kaitlyn's dad — Darren Cunningham — while both were based at Camp Victory. The two became close friends. When Cunningham, a military police officer, was killed in a rocket attack in October 2004, just a month before his retirement, Buswell became even more of a father figure for Kaitlyn — and in some ways helped Cunningham's family deal with his death.

For the next two years, Buswell worked at his intelligence post at Fort Hood, then was transferred to a similar job in San Antonio. But as he worked, he studied and read about what had happened on 9/11 — and came to the conclusions that would get him in so much trouble.

The terrorist attacks of 2001 had a profound effect on Buswell.

Before the much-disputed presidential election of 2000, Buswell shared with his father a view that very few held at the time. He was convinced that if George W. Bush won, he would take the country to war with Iraq to finish his father's work. He believed the younger Bush would be too beholden to oil interests — and feared what that would mean for America's foreign policy.

When the planes hit the World Trade Center towers on 9/11, Buswell later told his father, he figured that war with Iraq was coming, even if the country had nothing to do with the attacks. Being a loyal soldier, he kept his views private for a long while.

"He didn't want to rock the boat," Buswell's father said. "Like all of us, he was somewhat in shock after what happened on 9/11." And, as he told his father, his job was to serve. He was proud to do it, no matter who was directing policy.

By the time he was transferred to Fort Sam Houston, Buswell had developed strong opinions about what had happened. He had come to believe that the World Trade Center attacks were aided by persons on the inside and that the planes that crashed into the towers were just one component of a larger, more complex attack. The career soldier had effectively become a member of what's known as the "9/11 truth movement," which has continued to grow in spite of news media coverage that has generally refused to take the questions seriously. The movement includes many factions, espousing theories from the somewhat plausible to the really out-there folks who talk about space weapons bringing down the New York towers. The doubters include people like Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban, who recently agreed to distribute Loose Change Final Cut, a 9/11 conspiracy movie, and actors Charlie Sheen and Rosie O'Donnell, whose 9/11 dissents have been well-publicized.

In light of his new job, Buswell wanted to make sure his superiors knew of his views. He went to Chief Warrant Officer Mario Torres, a legal advisor to his division at Fort Sam Houston. Buswell told Torres he would not be willing to write reports or give speeches that required him to say things he didn't believe regarding 9/11.

He shared with Torres his belief that the facts contradicted large parts of the official story of what had happened that day, calling the attacks an "inside job" — one of the central beliefs of many truth movement members. Torres didn't see a problem: Buswell would not be working on anything related to 9/11, he said, and compared the sergeant's views versus the official story to liking beer over wine. His concerns dismissed, Buswell went to work.

It was only a few weeks later, on Aug. 2, when Buswell received the e-mail that knocked his career off its tracks. The unsolicited message was sent to him and 38 others by someone who gave his name as Larry Anderson. No such person could be located at the San Antonio fort, and Buswell's superiors declined to comment or to talk about the sender of the original e-mail.

The e-mail's subject line read: "F4 vs. Concrete Wall." The message referred to "loony liberal reasoning" that there must have been a conspiracy involved in the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon because there allegedly wasn't enough airplane debris left behind for the building to have been hit by an airliner. Anderson referred to a film clip showing, he said, an Air Force engineering test in which an F4 Phantom fighter jet crashed at 500 mph into a heavily reinforced concrete wall surrounding a nuclear reactor site. The jet "turned to vapor," Anderson claimed, thereby explaining the lack of plane wreckage at the Pentagon.

Later that day, Buswell committed the same infraction as Anderson: From his Army computer, he sent a mass reply to all the folks who got the initial message. Buswell's crime was clicking the "Reply All" button — a mistake he still regrets.

The comparison between the F4 and a 757 hitting the Pentagon, he wrote, "serves only to muddy the issue," because the fighter jet hitting a concrete barrier hardened to nuclear containment standards is very different from a plane hitting the Pentagon. The real issue, Buswell said, was that the official story on what happened that day "is filled with errors.

"We all know and saw 2 planes hitting the WTC buildings," he wrote. "[W]e didn't see the 757 hit the Pentagon, nor did we see the plane crash in Shanksville, PA. Both the PA and Pentagon 'crashes' don't have [the] tell-tale signs of a jumbo-jet impacting those zones!

"The Pentagon would have huge wing impacts in the side of the building; it didn't. Shanksville, PA would have had debris, and a large debris field; it didn't."

He went on to express doubt that "some Arabs in caves with cell phones" had been responsible for the tragedies of that day.

"I mean, how are Arabs benefiting from pulling off 9/11?" Buswell asked. "They have more war, more death and dismal conditions, so, how did 911 benefit them? Answer: It didn't. So, who benefited from 9-11? The answer is sad, but simple: The Military Industrial Complex." The idea of a 9/11 conspiracy, he added, is neither "Liberal Lunacy ... nor is it Conservative Kookiness."

"People, fellow citizens we've been had!" he wrote. "We must demand a new independent investigation into 911 and look at all the options of that day ... Even the most incredulous theories must be examined."

Not an opinion one might have expected from a career soldier — but then, expressing opinions, especially those of dissent, is the American way. The e-mail exchange hadn't seemed particularly important to Buswell, he later told his family. He found out differently the next morning.

His key wouldn't open the door to his office.

That was the first clue Buswell had that something was wrong. In short order, he was informed that a "15-6 investigation" had been opened regarding his use of the military e-mail network. It's the same designation given the investigation into the Abu Ghraib torture scandal.

Over the next few days, Buswell was informed of the removal of his security clearance, subjected to intense scrutiny and intimidation, and alienated from other members of his intelligence division when he was relegated to secretarial work while the investigation went on. He was fired from his job and demoted to platoon sergeant.

In a letter appointing Major Edwin Escobar to lead the investigation, Col. Luke S. Green, chief of staff of the Fifth Army, wrote, "SFC Buswell failed to obey a general order or regulation when he used his Government issued email account to send messages disloyal to the United States [emphasis added] with the intent of engendering disloyalty or disaffection for the United States in a manner that brought discredit upon the United States Army."

Green added that Buswell "allegedly asserts that he has information that proves a conspiracy on the part of the US military industrial complex to attack targets within the United States (e.g., The Pentagon), opinions which he asserts publicly and over Government email systems."

However, no other documents related to the investigation mention Buswell's opinions or question his loyalty. Officially, he was charged only with violating an Army policy regarding use of the military's e-mail network. Winthrop Buswell said his son has acknowledged the infraction, but also noted it was the first time he'd ever heard of the rule being enforced.

Green, at the behest of Lt. General, Robert T. Clark, deputy commanding general of the Fifth Army, ordered that Buswell undergo a mental health exam. However, the physician in charge of the medical center's mental health division declined to administer the test, saying that Buswell's actions did not warrant it.

Buswell fought back. He contacted U.S. Rep. Charles A. Gonzales of San Antonio to register a complaint. Gonzales subsequently requested information from the Army about the investigation, but according to his aides, no other action has been taken. The request was given a congressional inquiry case number and promptly put aside.

In another sense though, Buswell has given up — at least on the idea of continuing his Army career. He filed retirement papers, set to take effect April 1, 2008.

"Donald expressed to me his disappointment in the Army after all that has happened," said his father. "I raised my son to love America. He still gets chills when he sees the flag flying and hears our national anthem. He's committed his life to serving our country, only to get tossed aside like this. It brings me great sadness."

When his son gets out, he said, he plans to become an advocate for the 9/11 truth movement.

For the last 10 months, Buswell has spent his days tending to the needs of wounded Iraq War veterans at the San Antonio medical center.

"The service has mostly been good to Donald," said the elder Buswell, a painter and retired locomotive engineer from Loudon, N.H. "He wouldn't have made a career out of it if it wasn't. But after all the controversy and the investigation, the thing that surprises me most is how he reacted to being fired. When they assigned him to the medical center, he told me, 'Dad, I truly consider this to be an honor. To be given such an important task as some kind of retaliation against me is confusing, but it is truly my honor to help these men and women right now.'"

On the other hand, the elder Buswell said, his son's empathy toward the soldiers now in his care isn't surprising.

"He provides great solace to the soldiers," Winthrop said. "He is a good listener and knows what they're going through, having been in Iraq and suffering injuries there as well. They truly appreciate him."

Family members say that's par for the course for Buswell, a guy who delivered a Father's Day present to Darren Cunningham from his daughter back in 2004 and even consulted Darren about raising his friend's daughter, from whom Cunningham had years earlier become estranged.

"I don't know what I've done in my life to deserve such a blessing, but having Donny around has helped me and my family deal with losing Darren," said Glenn Cunningham, Darren's older brother. "I really admire and respect Donny for that, and because of how principled he is. Some people don't have the sense of honor that Donny has. And, you know, Donny ... He says things sometimes that get him into trouble, but he says them because he feels it's the right thing to do. And I really, deeply respect that."

To this day, Winthrop Buswell said, his son still cannot believe the military would come down on him so hard for sharing a view widely held across the United States.

"Donald really did nothing wrong," his father said. "He responded to an e-mail. How many of us in civilian life respond to e-mail forwards from co-workers or friends? Is that really a crime? ... He is convinced, as I am also, that the 9/11 attacks are not what they seem. We love this country. I even voted for Bush in 2000. Sadly, I must say that I do regret it."

He shares many of his son's doubts and questions about what happened six years ago.

"When you look back at that day — that terrible, terrible day — it seems almost like another lifetime ago," he said. "Donald believes bombs were planted in the towers and that the investigation exhibited a number of very questionable characteristics. Like, how could fire melt the steel core of the towers? Or, why did the 9/11 Commission not talk about World Trade Center 7? That [building] fell around 5 p.m., but we don't know why. And if it is true what we've heard recently, that a physics professor at [Brigham Young University] found elements of steel-cutting agents in the melted steel from the towers, why is that met with cries of insanity? There is a possibility that what really happened was much more than what we were told."

Not everyone close to the Buswells shares those views. Glenn Cunningham, who has become close friends with Buswell, much like his brother Darren, does not put much stock in conspiracy theories.

"I'm not one for conspiracies, but from what Donny is saying, it really does sound kinda questionable," he said. "But I haven't looked at it. I'm not in any movement ... And I just can't imagine what people expect to come out of it. Of course I want to know the truth. Truth is always important, and if they're lying to cover something up, we should find out. But then what?"

Winthrop Buswell isn't strident when he talks about 9/11. He just raises questions and encourage others to do the same — and that's all his son has done, he said.

"I pray Donald does not get in further trouble for standing up and speaking with his conscience," he said. "I wish we were not all swept up in it. But here we are. So what will we do?"

"Donald told me once, 'Dad, I hate feeling the way I do. I just hate it. And if I'm wrong, gosh, I'll just apologize to no end. But I can't deny where the facts have led, and I can't tell you how disappointed I am. The evidence just seems so prominent, and the question must be asked.'"

"Sadly, I agree with my son," concluded Buswell. "I want the truth. Nothing less. We should all want that."

Stephen C. Webster is a freelance journalist in North Texas. A version of this story appeared originally in the Lone Star Iconoclast, published in Crawford, Texas.